

Boy boobs are a growing problem--literally--as Central New York teen can attest

By Amber Smith/The Post-Standard

February 18, 2010, 11:00AM

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Columbia News Service

The first image that comes to mind when you think of “man boobs” is probably a 65-year-old potbellied man sitting in an open shirt proudly flaunting his bosomy body to the world—not Timothy Hartley.

Hartley, an otherwise normal 13-year-old from just outside Syracuse, N.Y., suffered physically—and emotionally—from the effects of **gynecomastia**, or man boobs. And while it is common for adults to repair their bodies through plastic surgery, teenagers face a more complicated set of financial and personal costs when they decide to go under the knife to improve their appearance.

The **American Society of Plastic Surgeons** reports that 14,203 males between the ages of 13 and 19 received breast reduction surgery in 2008, making up 4 out of 5 patients seeking that type of procedure. While the actual number of surgeries dropped from the year before, most likely because of the economic downturn, the number of male teens getting breast reductions rose 79 percent between 2003 and 2008.

“Imagine how hard it is to have to hide your body at that age,” said **Dr. Nolan Karp**, an associate professor of plastic surgery at the New York University School of Medicine. “The last thing you’d want is to be invited to a pool party or to someone’s beach house where everyone is in their bathing suit and you’re in the corner sweating in a shirt.”

Gynecomastia—a combination of the Greek terms for woman and breasts—describes when the male mammary gland is abnormally large. Potential causes of “gyne” include genetics, kidney disease, and marijuana and steroid use, but it most often occurs as a result of hormone level changes experienced during infancy, middle age and, in particular, teenage puberty. In the majority of cases, the nipple-area growth is benign and naturally goes away within four years. But in a small percentage of young men, it persists—exposing them to the relentless cruelty of their peers.

“Other kids used to flick them, and I’d get so frustrated,” said Hartley, referring to his run-ins with elementary school bullies. “I didn’t like going out because it always felt like everybody was staring at me.” Worried about how gynecomastia would affect him as he prepared to enter middle school, Hartley’s parents proposed he undergo surgery to reduce the size of both his breasts in 2008, when he was 11 years old.

Dr. Loren Schechter, a spokesman for the ASPS, says it is generally good practice to ensure that hormones have stabilized and that the breast has not changed size for at least two years before operating, to avoid recurrences. But he acknowledged that this was not mandatory.

There are also those who say surgery should be avoided altogether. Dr. Henry Anhalt, a 15-year veteran of pediatric endocrinology who runs his own private practice in New York, believes surgery should be considered only if the teen is suffering severe psychological trauma. Even then, Anhalt cautions patients to “take ample time to research the problem with a qualified mental health provider.”

But the Hartleys wanted to act before their son endured any trauma at school. “I remember what gym class was like at his age,” said Timothy’s father, Mike, who also struggled with gynecomastia throughout his adolescent and adult years. “It was something I never forgot, and to think of my kid going through the same thing, I didn’t want that to happen.” The family eventually contacted Manhattan gynecomastia specialist Dr. **Elliot W. Jacobs**, who estimates he has performed close to 70 breast reduction surgeries on male teens.

One of the most common misconceptions about gynecomastia is that it is simply a result of poor diet and exercise. Though obesity almost certainly plays a role in its prevalence, gynecomastia is by no means limited to overweight teens. Gina Bradshaw’s son, whom she declined to publicly name to avoid embarrassment, played football and ran track for his high school in Westchester County, New York, but could not get rid of what she referred to as the “fried egg” on his chest: “He would try to massage it to make it go down. He wore tight shirts to try and compress it. But nothing worked.”



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Gynecomastia is a medical condition, which is not caused by diet or exercise habits.

Indeed, exercise can sometimes make the breast even more pronounced by slimming down the body and chest and leaving the enlarged mammary gland unchanged. Increased exercise can also cause the muscle below the tissue to push the breast out farther. Some even try to gain, rather than lose, weight to match and mask their chest. When faced with the prospect of sending her 17-year-old son off to a college football locker room with what some boys crudely call "bitch tits," Bradshaw agreed to let him get breast reduction surgery as a graduation present.

While the most obvious changes from surgery are physical, perhaps the most drastic ones are emotional. Anthony T., an eighth-grader from Waterford, Conn., says he felt an immediate difference after he had his surgery. No longer burdened by the need to hide his body under layers of oversize clothing, Anthony said he feels more confident, open and active than ever before. "I was shocked when I saw myself," he said. "It felt like a new beginning, and I really want to keep it like that."

For parents who've seen the transformation in their children—the straighter posture, the pulled-back shoulders and suddenly outgoing personality—surgery has been as a worthwhile investment, despite the hefty price tag. The average fee for gynecomastia surgery among ASPS members is \$3,282, but after adding the costs of the initial consultation, operating room, anesthesiologist, postoperative care and travel expenses, most families are looking at somewhere between \$6,000 and \$10,000 in medical expenses.

Insurance companies generally refuse to cover the surgery, deeming it a nonessential cosmetic operation. Hartley's mother, Lori, a banquet server, was turned down three times before she managed to convince her employer's health insurer that the procedure was necessary to her son's long-term development. Nonetheless, she and her husband have been forced to borrow money from friends in order to pay for the \$8,600 procedure. But Lori doesn't regret her decision. "Everyone spends stupid amounts of money on stupid things," she said. "But this is one thing that can really change my son's life."

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